

Exchange With Reporters Prior to a Meeting With Released U.S. Army Infantrymen at Ramstein Air Base, Germany May 5, 1999

Q. Mr. President, would you favor releasing the Yugoslav soldiers, now that the U.S. soldiers have been released?

The President. I think Secretary Cohen answered this earlier today, but several days ago I raised this issue with our national security people, asking them if they would look at it and make recommendations, and I expect to get it in a couple days. And right now I'm just glad they're home, or they're halfway home, anyway—a couple days they'll be home.

What I think all Americans want for these fine soldiers is what we also want for the over one million people of Kosovo. We want them to go home, too.

And their families—I want to tell you, I had occasion to talk with their families on a couple of occasions, and they were concerned, loving, and they were vigorous advocates for their loved ones. And I was very proud of the way they conducted themselves during this incredibly difficult time for them as well. And I want to thank them for the loyalty they had for their

children, husbands, nephews, brothers and for the love they have for their country. I was also very moved by them.

Q. Why do you think Milosevic let them go, sir?

The President. I think he had a number of motives. The important thing is that he did let them go. They were in a peacekeeping mission in Macedonia; they had nothing whatever to do with this. They never should have been taken in the first place. I appreciate what they were doing in Macedonia and their service to our country, and I'm glad they're free.

NOTE: The exchange began at 5:53 p.m. at the air base. In his remarks, the President referred to Staff Sgt. Andrew A. Ramirez, USA, Staff Sgt. Christopher J. Stone, USA, and Spec. Steven M. Gonzales, USA, infantrymen released from custody in Serbia; and President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro). A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

Remarks Following Dinner With the Troops at Ramstein Air Base May 5, 1999

The President. Thank you very much. General Jumper, General Wooley, ladies and gentlemen, let me first of all say that I know I speak for all the people in our group—the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, General Shelton, and others—in saying that we are delighted to be here and very proud of you.

I have been to Ramstein at least three times since I've been President. I was trying to think; it may be four. But I feel a special affinity for this base. I flew from here into Bosnia in 1995, when the people who were stationed here then did so much to restore freedom and peace to the people there.

There are a lot of things I'd like to say, as briefly as I can. First of all, I'd like to tell you I had a real good time tonight taking all the pictures and—[laughter]—I like having the

opportunity to look our men and women in uniform in the eye and see where you're from and hear a little about your views. I thank especially the people who had dinner with me at the table over there tonight. I got questions about the Middle East peace process and the situation in Iraq and the long-term prospects in Kosovo and——

Audience member. Pay raises.

The President. —and pay raises, that's right. [Laughter] And they did a very good job. I want you to know, the guys at the table, they did a good job, because we talked a lot about how the Air Force and the Navy and this year probably the Army will be down on their recruitment goals and the reenlistment problems and how we face the converging pressures of